GREATEST PHILANTHROPY IN HISTORY POSTPONED BY EUROPEAN CONFLICT

Thousands Threatened With Starvation in China Because Money Cannot Be Obtained to Carry Out Red Cross Plans to End Disastrous Floods

THE war in Europe will be the cause of many thousands of deaths and an immense amount of suffering in China. If it were not for the conflict now ruling money could be had for the succor of multitudes of Chinese who are perishing for lack of food.

There has been a dreadful flood in the Huai River region of central China, the worst, it is said, that has occurred in sixty years. Following it has come widespread famine. The Chinese Government has appealed to American bankers for $5,000,000 with which to pay for labor on an immense engineering project for flood prevention, but the bankers, who might otherwise be willing to make the loan are unable to do so, their money being tied up by the war.

Arrangements in fact had already been practically concluded under which certain moneyed men in this country were to lend about $30,000,000 to the Government of China for the purpose in question. Even now the project is only postponed, but the delay is an exceedingly serious matter for the flood sufferers. If the work could be started great numbers of Chinese might be employed at wages which would enable them to buy the wherewithal to keep themselves and their families from starvation. Or they might be paid in food.

The $5,000,000 asked for by China would suffice to start the project, the idea of which may be said to have been originated by the American Red Cross. Through the Department of State the Red Cross a little while ago approached the Chinese Government with a proposition to the effect that American engineers should undertake the job of putting a stop to floods in the much afflicted region, the requisite money being furnished by American bankers at a moderate rate of interest say 5 per cent. This suggestion was gratefully accepted by China and an expert, Charles D. Jameson, was sent by the Red Cross to look over the territory and see what could be done.

In the meantime arrangements were agreed on between this Government and the Government of China. President Wilson took up the idea with enthusiasm, and at his request Congress authorized him to grant leave of absence to an engineer officer of the army, who should act as chief engineer of the contemplated work. At China's suggestion the selection of the engineer in chief was left to the Red Cross, which picked out Col. William L. Sibert as the most suitable man. As evidence of his capacity it will suffice to say that Col. Sibert was the builder of the famous Gatun locks and dam on the Isthmus of Panama.

Here, it should be realized, was a philanthropy the like of which has not been known before in history—an effort, in a word, by one nation to extend to another a helping hand and an incalculable benefit, without looking for any recompense whatever. When, a few years ago, the Red Cross was doing what it could in China to alleviate the miseries of the bubonic plague, its workers had an incidental opportunity to observe the distress caused by the oft recurring floods in the Huai River region. It struck them that the floods could be prevented if proper engineering means were employed for the purpose, and hence came the idea which has taken shape as here described.

Early in last June a party of engineers headed by Col. Sibert was sent by the American Government to China to make a more extended survey and to report on the feasibility of the plan suggested by Mr. Jameson. It comprised seventeen persons, one of them being Arthur P. Davis, chief engineer of the United States Reclamation Service, and another D. W. Mead, professor of hydraulic engineering in the University of Wisconsin. Attached to the party as an assistant was Sylvanus T. Suen, a bright young Chinaman newly graduated from Prof. Mead's department in the University of Wisconsin, the notion being that much would be gained if Chinese engineers could be taught to take care of such problems for themselves.

The party got back to this country only a few weeks ago, and has made a report to the affect that the reclamation of the afflicted territory is entirely practicable through the adoption of means duly set forth. Not only can floods in future be prevented but a vast area of land now useless for agriculture will incidentally be redeemed. The total cost is estimated at $30,000,000. It had already been agreed by China that, if American bankers would lend the money, security for the payment of interest and principal would be given by pledging the tolls of the Grand Canal, which passes through the region, and such cash returns as might accrue from the lease or sale of the reclaimed lands.

Now, in order that the character of the problem may be fully understood, it should be explained that the Grand Canal—itself a very wonderful engineering work, the most ancient part of which according to Confucius dates back to the fifth century B. C.—is an artificial river over 1,000 miles long, extending all the way from Hang-Chow to Tientsin. Flowing between high dike banks raised above the level of the plain through which it passes, it is spanned by a number of fine stone bridges, several rivers enter it and the great Hoangho cuts clear across it. Its construction was originally undertaken for the purpose of providing a waterway by which rice and other agricultural products might be carried to Pekin.

Unfortunately the canal itself cuts across another great river, the Huai, shutting off its outlet to the sea. As a result the waters of the Huai, unable to escape, are impounded, forming enormous lakes and immense areas of swamp. This means that much of the region is rendered useless for agriculture in districts where, owing to density of population, every square foot of land is needed for the production of food. Every now and then when there happens to be an excess of rainfall disastrous floods occur, with consequent famines which have cost in the aggregate many millions of lives.

This, however, is not all. The great Hoangho, or Yellow River—itself much addicted to floods, and on this account long known as China's sorrow—has since time immemorial been disinclined to stay in one bed. In 1324 it usurped the bed of the Huai, far to the south of its present course, and so choked up this bed as to destroy what usefulness it had left for discharging superfluous waters. Not until 1853, after a lapse of more than five centuries, did it go back to its former channel. A part of the scheme at present contemplated is to tie up the Yellow River in such a way that it will "stay put."

Just before the departure of the party of American engineers for China they were the guests at dinner of the Chinese Minister, Kai fu Shah, in Washington. In a speech on that occasion Mr. Kai said:

"It was with a flood in the region of the Huai River, about forty centuries ago, that the first authentic record in Chinese history begins. The great engineer who had charge of the work of controlling the flood was Yu. It took him nine years to clear the channels of the streams and drain all the superfluous water into the sea or into the Yang-tze-kiang. On account of this achievement the Chinese people have unto this day held Yu as the greatest benefactor of the race, and have given him the title of the Great Yu."

Thus it appears that floods in this region long antedated the construction of the Grand Canal. But that artificial waterway has made them much worse and more frequent. It remains for American engineers, with the help of modern scientific methods, to work out on a much larger scale and with effective permanent results the problem attacked anciently by Yu. To some extent the same general idea will be followed, the most important feature of the project now contemplated being the making of channels by which the excess waters may be conducted into the Great River, or Yang-tze-kiang.

As already stated, the shutting off of the Huai from its natural outlets has so impounded the waters of that stream as to form a number of lakes, three of which are of great size, the Huntze, by far the biggest, the Pao Ying, and the Kao Yu. They are very shallow bodies of water, and are bordered by vast swamps. The contemplated engineering operations will wipe them off the map, incidentally drying up the swamps, and by this means will be reclaimed more than 1,000,000 acres of exceedingly fertile land, well adapted for the growing of rice and all manner of garden truck.

Measures will be taken to regulate the height of water in the Huai, at its mouth, so that there may be no interference with navigation, and to provide water for irrigating the bed of the Huntze Lake, as well as extensive areas of rice lands east of the Grand Canal, and for insuring also the navigability of the canal itself. Droughts as well as floods have afflicted that region, and it will be fortunately practicable to provide against the one as well as against the other. The construction of two locks in the canal will be required, and two more will have to be built to maintain present navigable connections with it.

The value of the lands reclaimed is conservatively estimated by Col. Sibert and his fellow engineers at nearly $30,000,000; it is likely to be twice as much. In addition, the benefits to other lands within the area of the contemplated project are reckoned at something like $25,000,000, taking irrigation into account. Thus it will be seen that China has ample security to offer for the money she wishes to borrow from American bankers.

The cost of the work done by the expeditionary engineering party in China, including travel and all other expenses, was a trifle over $67,000, half of which was paid by the Red Cross and the other half by the Chinese Government. The cash thus advanced by the Red Cross is to be refunded when the bonds have been marketed and the work has been undertaken.

The region of central China here described, between the Yang-tze-kiang and Yellow rivers, is a vast alluvial plain. Wonderfully fertile, it has long been known as the granary of China. Through it runs—or ought to run, if its course were not improperly controlled—the great Huai.

This territory has been called a "continent in the making." Many big rivers, flowing down from lofty mountain ranges on the west and north, have made the land by their deposits of richly productive silt through ages. But much can be done by engineering, however, to modify the situation and to improve conditions as regards the otherwise inevitable droughts and floods.

As matters now stand, unless something is accomplished by such engineering artifices, there is no prospect of relief. On the contrary, floods have become increasingly frequent, with loss of life correspondingly augmented, and incidental suffering indescribable.

So fertile is the land that under normal conditions it would regularly yield two crops a year. But actually not more than an average of two crops in every five years are garnered. The farmers plant in spring, and before harvest time floods arrive and destroy the results of their labors. Very likely the same thing happens the next year, and the year after, until a season comes when the unfortunate people have no seed to sow, no ploughs or other farm implements with which to till the soil, and not even any household furniture. Everything has been sold to buy food. Then they die of starvation, or are driven to crime and even cannibalism.

Last spring and in the early summer there was a severe drought in the Huai River region. Late in summer came the flood—the worst, as has been said, in sixty years. Scores of villages were under water. There was no food. Whole families—in one instance noted by the news despatches eleven persons—committed suicide together. Parents, themselves hopeless of rescue or survival, tied their children to the wooden doors of their huts and let them float away on the waste of waters, taking a chance that somebody might save them. Hundreds of little ones thus relinquished to their fate perished of hunger or were drowned.

Under such circumstances it is unfortunate that, owing to the war in Europe, the loan of the money required for carrying out the great enterprise of international benevolence here described should be withheld. Happily, the project is merely postponed. Already the American Red Cross has received assurances from the bankers that the cash will be forthcoming later. This, of course, may not be for some time yet; it must depend upon the duration of the war.

When the money is made available it will furnish the most useful kind of help by giving employment to great numbers of Chinese laborers in the engineering work. Supposing that half the total estimated amount, $15,000,000, goes for wages earned by poor Chinamen it will carry them a long way in a country where the ordinary price of labor is 10 cents a day. It is not unlikely that their labor will be largely paid for in food, a plan adopted already by the Red Cross, which during the last seven years has sent to the Huai River region no less than $577,000 in cash, in addition to two big shiploads of things to eat.

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Col. William L. Sibert, appointed chief engineer in charge of the proposed reclamation of China.

A flooded village in the Huai River region.

MME NORDICA'S SEARCH FOR GOLD IN BLACK SAND OF SNAKE RIVER, IDAHO

LAST summer I spent six weeks on a fruit ranch in western Idaho, on the banks of the Snake River. One day while driving through the sage brush and sand in what is known as the Big Bend country I noticed out in the river some small islands and on the end of the largest of them the remains of a derrick.

"That," said my companion, "is where Mme. Nordica was dredging for gold some years ago. Those small islands were made then."

"Mme. Nordica!" I exclaimed. "Not the singer?"

"Yes, and Mrs. Brenner over here boarded her while she was looking after the work. If you are interested you'd better call and talk with her."

I was interested and lost no time in getting a mutual acquaintance to take me to call on Mrs. Brenner. The Brenners live in one of the larger and older places; the house is now seventeen years old. Rather a venerable age in that new country, where much of the desert is still unreclaimed.

"Tell me the story of Mme. Nordica's being here," I asked Mrs. Brenner after we had talked a while of other things. "How did she happen to come? And was she really looking for gold, or did she just want to get away from everybody and everything?"

"Oh, she was really interested in gold mining, and it came about naturally enough. Capt. Morgan of the Geological Survey knew of the gold in the Snake River. There is gold there all right; it is called flour gold and is mixed with the black sand in the river bed. Well, he thought he had discovered a practical process for separating the gold from the sand, so he formed a stock company of twelve New York people, among whom were Mme. Nordica and her fiance, Mr. Young.

"Mme. Nordica had some Western engagements that season, and decided to stop off and see for herself where the money went. While in this region Capt. Morgan used to board at the Huttons, the next place, but when he and Mme. Nordica came along about 5 o'clock one Tuesday afternoon, right in one of our awful sand storms, Mrs. Hutton was seriously ill, and couldn't keep them. They came to my house and asked me to take them just for that night, and I agreed.

"Mme. Nordica quickly made herself one of us and after supper helped me with the dishes, and was so natural and unassuming and friendly that I told her she might stay as long as she wished. Later her negro servant Edward came, and she made him do all kinds of things to help me; make the beds, wash dishes, prepare vegetables, fill lamps and the like. He was very handy and could do most anything."

"How long was Mme. Nordica with you?"

"Well, she stayed that time till the next Monday, six days, when she went to Portland to sing at the rose festival. During that time Capt. Morgan went up to Boise to get machinery for dredging out the sand and two experienced miners, and when Madame came back from Portland she stayed ten days longer.

"She was 49 when she was here—it was in 1908—and in the height of her powers. She was deeply attached to Mr. Young, her fiance, and wrote to him every day. She showed me his picture and spoke of him often and always most affectionately."

"How did she spend the time while here?"

"Usually she slept till 9; then had her breakfast, rolls and very strong coffee with cream but no sugar. She went through her vocal gymnastics faithfully every morning, and had Edward read to her a good deal. Many times she would take a shallow pan and sit out by the well in the back yard and wash out the gold for herself.

"She was always humming something or other. At that time 'The Merry Widow' was all the rage, and it seemed for weeks after she left as if that music were still floating about the house. One evening she sang a lullaby to Bess, my little son, who was three and a half then, and he calmly remarked, 'I like my mamma's singing better.' That amused Madame very much, and she enjoyed telling it, saying that a child did not know how to flatter.

"In the afternoons Mr. Brenner or Sam Thomas would drive her over to the river, about two miles from here, to watch the men at work. One day, though, she surprised them by coming early in the morning to see that they did a full day's work. I put up the dinner, but she spread it out and made coffee for herself and the men over a sage brush fire. She spoke several times of how much she enjoyed that experience. When she first came she bought a man's Stetson hat in Parma and wore that constantly and a plain black tailor made suit. It was of very good material."

"How about the gold?" I interrupted.

"Well, during the time she was here they expressed a great many boxes of the sand back to New York, but the process for separating the gold did not prove successful and Madame dropped the whole scheme. It was characteristic of her New England shrewdness that she must see where her money went; that the men must do full work, and that the process must be proved a success before she put more money in; yet she was exceedingly generous. She gave the men and others handsome presents, and while she would not sing for us, saying that my house was too small for her voice, she graciously received a company of my friends and neighbors one evening, and even furnished the refreshments.

"Usually in the evenings she would sit in the living room with the rest of us and help me with my sewing or mending. After one had gone I found that she had put a patch on the right side of my stocking sheet and I wondered if that was the New England way and if she had been taught to do it so in order to make the surface of the stocking smoother to the foot. Do you know?"

I confessed that I didn't, but it seemed like a good idea.

"When Mme. Nordica came back from Portland she brought her sister, Mrs. Castillio, from California with her. She was the dearest, sweetest little old lady, much older than Madame. We all quite fell in love with her. She has written to me often, and I received a long letter from her after Madame's death.

"Mme. Nordica herself never forgot her friends. Soon after she left she sent me a photograph of herself taken specially for me, wearing all her pearls. How she loved pearls! She told me proudly that she had the finest pearls of any woman in America."

Mrs. Brenner showed the photograph and on it was written, "To Mary T. Brenner with love. Lillian Nordica. 1908."

"When did you last hear from her?" I asked.

"In 1913, and that is quite a story too. Mr. Brenner had business in Salem, Ore., and when he arrived he learned that Madame was in the city and was to sing that night. He went right up to her hotel to pay his respects, but the clerk told him that she had given strict orders that she was not to be disturbed. Then he went to the theatre to get a ticket, thinking he would hear her sing anyway, but every seat and even all the standing room had been sold.

"The man in the box office was a fellow Mason, so Mr. Brenner told him who he was and how anxious he was to see Mme. Nordica. The man promised to get him in on the stage for the reception after the recital which the management had planned. But Mme. Nordica was so tired that she refused to meet the people after all, and Mr. Brenner was standing on the sidewalk outside the theatre feeling thoroughly disappointed when she came out to step into a waiting taxicab.

"She caught sight of Mr. Brenner's face, for he was standing under an electric light, and though it was years since she had seen him she recognized him immediately and came up to him with both hands outstretched, saying how glad she was to see him and asking after me. Then she forgot all about being tired, turned off the cab and walked up to the hotel, about two or three blocks, with Mr. Brenner talking animatedly all the while.

"She had him come up to her parlor while she got out a new photograph for me and wrote a message on it. She told him when she came back from her trip around the world she was coming to us for a long time to just rest and visit—but she will never come now."

Madame Nordica on the bank of the Snake River, Parma, Idaho.